

Message Text

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ACTION EA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 NSAE-00 NSCE-00 SSO-00

USIE-00 INRE-00 PM-03 H-01 INR-07 L-02 NSC-05 PA-01

PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 IO-10 AID-05 /063 W

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O 280855Z FEB 75

FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8610

C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 1330

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, KS

SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT'S CONCILIATORY TREND PERSISTS

REF: SEOUL 1329

BEGIN SUMMARY: DESPITE CONTINUATION OF SHARP VERBAL EXCHANGES BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION IN WAKE OF REFERENDUM AND PRISONER RELEASE, ROKG SEEMS IN BETTER POSITION THAN BEFORE TO GET THROUGH TRADITIONALLY TOUCHY SPRING PERIOD WITHOUT RESORT TO ANY NEW HARSH COUNTER MEASURES. MAJOR QUESTION IN THIS REGARD CONTINUES TO BE WHETHER PRESIDENT PAK WILL OVEREACT, AS HAS BEEN CASE BEFORE, TO OPPOSITION MOVES WHICH DO NOT, IN FACT, THREATEN HIS RULE. END SUMMARY.

1. ALTHOUGH PRESIDENT PAK EVIDENTLY EXPECTED THE REFERENDUM TO SOMEHOW PULL THE RUG FROM UNDER THE OPPOSITION, THE RESULTS OF THE VOTE (NOT SURPRISINGLY) HAVE MADE LITTLE DIFFERENCE IN OPPOSITION ACTIVITY. NDP AND OTHER OPPOSITION ELEMENTS HAVE SIMPLY DENOUNCED REFERENDUM AS MEANINGLESS WHILE TRYING TO MAKE POLITICAL HAY OUT OF ALLEGED VOTING VIOLATIONS. GOVT ITSELF HAS FAILED TO EXPLOIT THE VOTE WITH SUBSEQUENT PR CAMPAIGN DESIGN TO PORTRAY THE OPPOSITION AS ISOLATED MINORITY. THUS, ALTHOUGH MOST OBJECTIVE OBSERVERS WILLING TO ACCEPT GOVT'S REFERENDUM VICTORY AS BASICALLY UNRIGGED, VOTE HAS NOT MADE ANY MATERIAL DIFFERENCE IN CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION.

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2. RELEASE OF EMERGENCY MEASURE PRISONERS HAS ALSO FAILED, CONTRARY TO PRESIDENT'S REPORTED EXPECTATIONS, TO SILENCE OPPOSITION, GIVING RISE INSTEAD TO NEW ISSUES, SUCH AS TORTURE CHARGES, QUESTION OF FINAL PARDON, AND WHETHER OR NOT STUDENTS AND TEACHERS WILL BE REINSTATED IN UNIVERSITIES. MOREOVER, IT IS POSSIBLE THAT SOME OF RELEASED FIGURES WILL ATTEMPT TO RESUME LEADING ROLE IN OPPOSITION MOVEMENT AND COULD, OVER LONGER RUN, GIVE NEW DRIVE TO THUS FAR INTERMITTENT AND RELATIVELY RESTRAINED OPPOSITION ATTACKS ON ROKG.

3. DESPITE THE FAILURE OF THESE MOVES TO BRING AS MUCH CALM TO THE POLITICAL SCENE AS THE GOVT EVIDENTLY HOPED FOR, THERE ARE SOME DISTINCT BRIGHT SPOTS FOR THE ROKG IN THE CURRENT PICTURE. THE NDP APPEARS TO BE, IF ANYTHING, WEAKER THAN AT THE END OF LAST YEAR. IT CONTINUES TO BE WRACKED BY INTERNAL BICKERING, AND ITS LEADER, KIM YONG-SAM, CONTINUES TO BE VIEWED BY MANY PARTY MEMBERS AND SEOUL INTELLECTUALS AS IMMATURE AND INEPT. MOREOVER, THE PARTY'S INABILITY TO MOUNT AN EFFECTIVE ANTI-GOVT MOVE DURING THE PERIOD LEADING UP TO THE REFERENDUM HAS FURTHER IMPRESSED MANY KOREANS WITH ITS WEAKNESS. THUS FAR, ALSO, THE PARTY'S EFFORTS TO PARLAY REFERENDUM VOTING IRREGULARITIES AND THE CHARGES OF PRISONER TORTURE INTO MAJOR POLITICAL ISSUES, HAVE NOT PROVEN SUCCESSFUL. THE LIKELIHOOD IS NOW STRONG THAT KIM YONG-SAM, FEELING THAT THE PARTY HAS SHOT ITS WAD AS FAR AS "EXTRA-ASSEMBLY" ACTIVITIES ARE CONCERNED, WILL RETURN TO A SPECIAL ASSEMBLY SESSION SOMETIME IN MARCH. WHILE AN ASSEMBLY SESSION IN NO WAY MEANS A GOVT-NDP TRUCE, IT MAY HAVE THE SETTLING EFFECT OF PUTTING POLITICAL SQUABBLING IN A FORUM WHERE IT BELONGS AND UNDERLINING NDP PARTICIPATION IN THE GOVERNMENTAL SYSTEM.

4. ANOTHER BRIGHT SPOT IS ON THE RELIGIOUS FRONT, WHERE THERE ARE CLEAR INDICATIONS THAT MAJOR LEADERS ARE SEEKING A COOLING OFF PERIOD. KIM KWAN-SOK, SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHRISTIAN CHURCHES (NCCC), TOLD THE AMBASSADOR RECENTLY THAT PROTESTANT LEADERS NOW FEEL THAT THE CHURCHES SHOULD DRAW BACK FROM ACTIVELY SUPPORTING THE OPPOSITION MOVEMENT AND WAIT TO SEE WHETHER MEANINGFUL POLITICAL COMMUNICATIONS WITH GOVT CAN BE ESTABLISHED IN THE WAKE OF THE PRISONER RELEASE. KIM SAID THAT FOR THE TIME BEING THE NCCC WILL REFRAIN FROM

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ORGANIZING CHURCH PROTEST SERVICES. WE HAVE ALSO HAD REPORTS THAT CARDINAL KIM IS ADVISING CATHOLIC CLERGYMEN TO AVOID STRICTLY POLITICAL ISSUES AND TO PURSUE THEIR SOCIAL GOALS BY NON-DISRUPTIVE MEANS.

5. THE MAJOR THREAT OF DISTURBANCES AND ANTI-GOVT ACTIVITY FACING THE ROKG COMES FROM THE STUDENTS, WHO WILL BE BACK AT THE UNIVERSITIES TOWARD THE MIDDLE OF MARCH. GOVT OFFICIALS, NEWSMEN,

OPPOSITION FIGURES, AND STUDENTS THEMSELVES ALL HAVE TOLD US THAT ANTI-GOVT DEMONSTRATIONS ARE A CERTAINTY. AS OF NOW, THE STUDENTS SEEM LIKELY TO PRESS FOR RELEASE OF THE PRP PRISONERS, LIFTING OF ROKG PRESSURES ON TONGA ILBO, REINSTATEMENT OF ANY PRISONERS NOT ALLOWED TO RESUME STUDENT OR TEACHER STATUS, INVESTIGATIONS OF CHARGES OF REFERENDUM RIGGING AND TORTURE, AND FOR CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES. SPECIFIC ISSUES, HOWEVER, DO SEEM NOT AS IMPORTANT TO STUDENTS AS GENERAL EXPRESSION OF OPPOSITION TO REGIME. DESPITE LIKELIHOOD OF DEMONSTRATIONS, NEVERTHELESS, IMPACT THEY WILL HAVE ON PUBLIC OR GOVT IS QUESTIONABLE. WE BELIEVE GOVT WILL BE ABLE, AS IT HAS BEEN IN THE PAST, TO RESTRICT DEMONSTRATIONS TO CAMPUSES AND THAT PRESS COVERAGE WILL BE LIMITED, ESPECIALLY IF TONGA ILBO MODERATES ITS ALL-OUT ANTI-GOVT FIGHT BY THAT TIME. MOREOVER, IF REPEATED DEMONSTRATIONS DO HAVE UNSETTLING EFFECT, CAMPUSES CAN BE EXPECTED TO CLOSE. A MOVE WHICH INVARIABLY HAS ENDED STUDENT ACTIVITIES. (THE FACT THAT KOREAN STUDENTS RARELY DEMONSTRATE WHEN THE SCHOOLS ARE CLOSED IS ITSELF AN INDICATION OF THEIR LACK OF ORGANIZATION AND THEIR LESS THAN TOTAL COMMITMENT.)

6. AS OF THIS JUNCTURE, THE GOVT SEEMS INTENT ON CONTINUING ITS MODERATE APPROACH (SEE REFTEL). WE HAVE BEEN TOLD BY GOVT SOURCES THAT MOST OF THE RELEASED STUDENTS WILL BE PARDONED SOME TIME IN MARCH AND ALLOWED TO RETURN TO THEIR STUDIES. AT THE SAME TIME, DRP ACTING CHAIRMAN HAS BEEN PUBLICLY EMPHASIZING THE GOVT'S INTENTION TO CONTINUE ITS SOFT LINE, WHILE KIM YONG-TAE AND OTHER DRP LEADERS HAVE BEEN TRYING HARD TO LAY THE GROUNDWORK FOR A SPECIAL ASSEMBLY SESSION IN MARCH. AS PART OF THE CONCILIATORY APPROACH, WE MAY WELL SEE IN THE NEAR FUTURE SOME OF THE CABINET CHANGES THAT HAVE BEEN RUMORED SINCE BEFORE THE REFERNDUM. WHILE WE DOUBT THAT THESE WILL BE SHOESALE OR THAT ANY ORGAN SUCH AS A "SUPREME COUNCIL" (AS WAS FLOATED IN A RECENT NYT ARTICLE) WILL BE ESTABLISHED, WE SUSPECT SOME OF THOSE IDENTIFIED IN THE PUBLIC MIND WITH THE HARD LINE (E.G. EDUCATION MINISTER YUN

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KI-CHUN) MAY HAVE TO STEP DOWN.

7. AS USUAL, AN IMPORTANT POTENTIAL FLY IN THE OINTMENT IS THE PRESIDENT HIMSELF. WITHOUT EXCEPTION, GOVT, OPPOSITION, AND THIRD-PARTY OBSERVERS DEXCRIBE HIM AS HIGHLY SENSITIVE TO CRITICISM IN GENERAL AND TO OPPOSITION ACTIVITY IN PARTICULAR. MOREOVER, WE HAVE HEARD RELIABLE REPORTS THAT THE PRESIDENT HAS BEEN ESPECIALLY DISTURBED BY WHAT HE TAKES TO BE THE FAILURE OF THE OPPOSITION TO REGARD THE REFERENDUM RESULTS AND THE PRISONER RELEASE WITH SUFFICIENT RESPECT AND GRATITUDE. ANY TENDENCY ON HIS PART TO EXPECT UNREALISTIC REACTIONS FROM THE OPPOSITION WOULD, OF COURSE, INCREASE THE POSSIBILITY OF HARSH COUNTERMEASURES IN THE FUTURE. WHATEVER HIS PREFERENCES ARE, HOWEVER, DURING THE LAST FEW MONTHS PAK HAS EITHER INITIATED OR APPROVED A SERIES OF CONCILIATORY MOVES, AND WE SEE NO

INDICATION THAT A REVERSAL OF THIS TREND IS IN THE OFFING.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: CONCILIATION, POLICIES, OPPOSITION PARTIES, POLITICAL SITUATION, PRISONERS RELEASE
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 28 FEB 1975
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: WorrelSW
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1975SEOUL01330
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D750070-1029
From: SEOUL
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1975/newtext/t1975022/aaaaabni.tel
Line Count: 171
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION EA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 75 SEOUL 1329
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: WorrelSW
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 16 JUL 2003
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <16 JUL 2003 by ShawDG>; APPROVED <18 NOV 2003 by WorrelSW>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
05 JUL 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: GOVERNMENT'S CONCILIATORY TREND PERSISTS
TAGS: PINT, PINS, KS
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 05 JUL 2006